THE COLONIES CLOTHED

A Survey of Consumer Interests in
New South Wales and Victoria
1787-1887

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INTRODUCTION

The argument of this thesis is that by choosing to spend the majority of their surplus purchasing power and/or credit on clothing and its materials, a large portion of the convict and working class settlers shaped the early economic, legal, business and social history of New South Wales and Victoria. There has been an impressive tradition of historians writing over the last fifteen years. Some of these scholars have emphasized the essential decency of early colonial society while repudiating sensationalist accounts of the deviant behaviour of a minority of early settlers. However, there has not as yet been a satisfactory study of the consumption patterns prevalent in the early years of these two colonies. There are a number of manuscripts in the Mitchell Library which give precise and detailed evidence of the consumer choices made by hundreds of convicts and settlers in early New South Wales. Similar evidence in the form of Customs statistics and newspaper advertising exists for the colony of Victoria. The manuscript account books of the first storekeepers in New South Wales and the Customs statistics of Victoria have as yet received no close attention by historians. Consequently, no clear evidence exists to put in perspective once and for all the myths surrounding the drinking habits of the early colonists.

These myths have been attacked from various angles by a number of historians but there remain serious misconceptions about early colonial consumer interests (and therefore about the nature of economic and social life in the colonies) which have regrettably influenced even the most recent work by distinguished Australian social historians. It is important that these misconceptions should be redressed by the detailing of extensive evidence of spending habits in the colonies from their inception. A knowledge of the actual consumer choices which were made by most of the convict and working class settlers most of the time, can lead to a wholly convincing picture of early colonial society when added to the work of those historians who have been emphasizing the normality of life in an ill-reputed land of rogues. It was a society not aberrant in any way but one which conformed strikingly to middle class British economic and social norms regarding the saving and spending of money. This
conformity was something that contemporary English middle class observers could never have presaged and thus found hard to swallow and even harder to describe dispassionately. The work of such historians as Fletcher, Hainsworth, Roe, Serle, Davison, Robinson, Alford, Hirst and others provides a coherent image of life in the early colonies of New South Wales and Victoria. It is hoped that this work will form a logical complement to a fine tradition of Australian history already well established.

The two main contributions of this thesis are firstly, the important evidence adduced concerning the spending habits (and thus by implication, the saving habits) of the early convict and emancipist settlers. Secondly, the thesis provides a rationale for the emphasis in contemporary middle class accounts on convict or working class dereliction and drunkenness by demonstrating totally different and utterly respectable spending and saving patterns. New evidence shows that consumption of clothing, even luxury clothing, dominated convict and working class life in the two colonies examined. It is alarming that the evidence concerning colonial drinking habits which is still being cited by reputable historians comes exclusively from contemporary literary observations, the personal impressions of mainly middle class observers.¹ Those same literary sources and others hitherto unexamined by historians will be analyzed critically to demonstrate the consumption habits and interests of most of the early settlers.

There is a plethora of manuscript and newspaper material which corroborates the active decision of those lowest in the socioeconomic structure to enjoy the fruits of their labour in the wearing of best black silk dresses and bonnets or best black suits and fine boots. It will be argued that the social possibilities and implications of this choice - the choice to buy and wear fine clothing - demonstrably antagonized many middle class observers. This antagonism is apparent in the written accounts of the

¹. A.E. Dingle, "The truly magnificent thirst", an historical survey of Australian drinking patterns, Historical Studies, Vol. 19, No. 75, p. 227, wrote "In view of such unanimity [regarding Australian thirst in the nineteenth century], it is rather surprising to discover that this assumption is based on the scattered observations of contemporaries who usually stressed the heavy drinking they witnessed, rather than on detailed empirical research". Disappointingly, Dr Dingle did not go on to explore the implications of this observation in his article.
colonies. The writers were piqued because the economic potential of the colonies had been adopted whole-heartedly and en masse by the same people who in England had been immediately distinguishable in the streets by their miserable and often ragged clothing. Affronted by the respectable reality of the well-dressed throngs of early Sydney and Melbourne, such observers unconsciously sought refuge in emphasizing minority cases of constant excessive spending on alcohol, thus contributing to a picture of life in early New South Wales and Victoria which has taken scholars many years to dismantle. Only those historians who had little or no recourse to contemporary literary sources, relying extensively on other sorts of manuscript or official evidence, or who recognized their social bias, have managed to create a consistent image of these early years.

The important point about the early history of both colonies is that higher wages and more free time meant that many working class people could exercise a consumer choice. This had marked social and economic consequences as working women and men began to patronize shops and then to display their fine clothes conspicuously in promenades in the Gardens, drives to the beach, picnic races, balls and other delightful pastimes not enjoyed by equivalent social groups on such a scale in contemporary England. By exercising their taste and choosing to spend heavily on clothing, the first generations of Australians were active in creating a new set of social and business traditions. In the colonies, a wider class base of people felt at ease in shops and came to exercise greater consumer power in their dealings with retailers very quickly relative to their contemporary English counterparts. The people of the colonies were responsible for generating a distinctively and recognizably Australian as opposed to English business style. It will be argued that this style had no element of inherent dishonesty or brashness about it, but was the logical outcome of a higher per capita income spent predominantly on a particular type of consumer goods. Thus this thesis demonstrates that given an increase in the standard of living for the lower classes in the colonies, these people took an active part in changing their way of life for the better, and one way they did this was through considerable expenditure on and enjoyment of clothing.